Daring Balloon Ascensions at the Fairbury Fair

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As the Fairbury Fair celebrates its 150th anniversary, it is easy to think first of harness racing, Floral Hall exhibits, or the carnival midway. But in the late 1800s, one of the biggest draws was not on the ground at all. The real excitement was hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of feet above the fairgrounds, where daring aeronauts rose into the sky in fragile balloons, often finishing their flights with a parachute drop that left fairgoers staring upward in awe.

The 1885 Fairbury Fair was one of the earliest to feature balloon ascensions as a headline attraction. Fair officials proudly advertised hot-air balloon flights on several afternoons of the fair. The balloon for those shows was heated over a fire, and as the air inside expanded, it became lighter than the air outside. Once the aeronaut was ready, the ground crew released the ropes, and the balloon rose slowly into the sky. For most Fairbury-area residents, this was their first time seeing a person leave the earth without a ladder or a tower. The sight of a lone figure in a basket drifting silently over Fairbury was enough to bring big crowds to the fairgrounds.

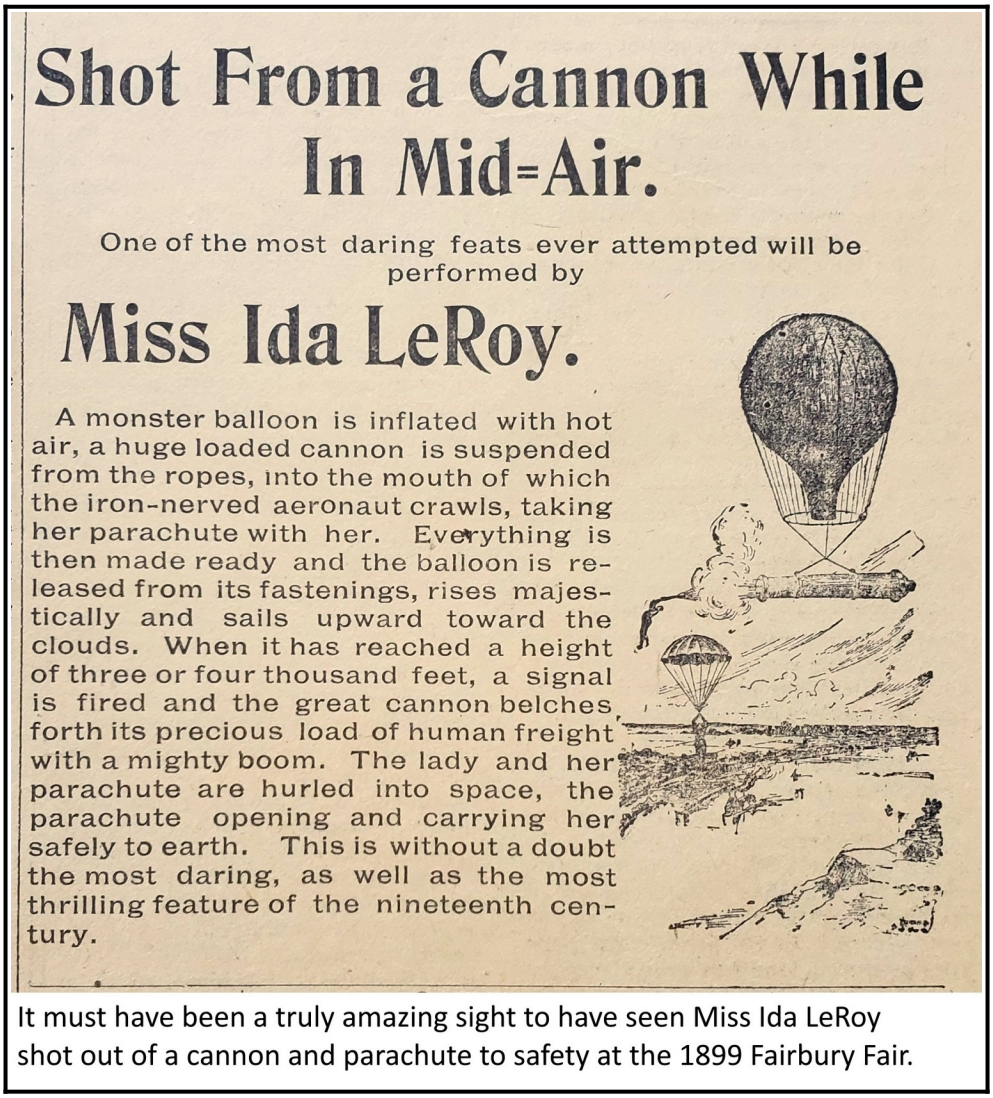
By the late 1880s, Fairbury had caught full-blown “balloon fever.” The 1887 fair again promised balloon ascensions as its main attraction. On one of those days, strong winds forced the cancellation of a scheduled flight, disappointing the crowd. When the balloon finally went up, it climbed to roughly 1,000 feet before the wind pushed it northward. The balloon drifted out of the fairgrounds and came down near Perlee’s store on Main Street. One can imagine townspeople chasing after it down the dusty road, craning their necks as the aeronaut tried to guide the wayward craft to a safe landing.

In 1889, balloon ascensions were once more the star attraction, this time with the added thrill of parachute jumps. Instead of simply riding the balloon back down, the aeronaut would step out, fall for a short distance, and then trust the folded parachute to open above him. To modern readers used to airplanes and helicopters, a parachute drop may sound routine. To a farm family in 1889, watching someone step off a balloon thousands of feet in the air must have seemed like a death-defying act.

The technology behind these shows was changing, too. Many early ascensions used hot-air balloons, but by the 1890s, some fair attractions were using gas balloons instead. Rather than relying on heated air, gas balloons were filled with hydrogen, a lighter-than-air gas that provides more lift than helium. Hydrogen was appealing to showmen because it could be produced on-site with relatively simple equipment. A portable gas generator, usually a stout metal tank, was filled with water and metal, often scrap iron or zinc, and then an acid was added. As the acid ate away at the metal, hydrogen gas bubbled off and was piped into the balloon envelope. Given enough time and enough old iron, the balloon would swell into a great “gas bag” large enough to lift a person and a parachute into the sky.

Hydrogen came with risks. It is far more flammable than helium and will burn readily if mixed with air and touched off by a spark or flame. But fairground promoters in the 1890s were not thinking about the Hindenburg disaster; that tragedy would not occur until 1937, nearly half a century later. To them, hydrogen was simply the most practical way to make a balloon "lighter than air" using the local water supply and materials they could haul in by wagon. The danger heightened the sense of drama, yet crowds still lined up along the fence to watch each launch.

The wildest act of all arrived at the 1899 Fairbury Fair in the form of Miss Ida LeRoy. She was advertised as a daring lady aeronaut who would perform one of the most thrilling feats of the nineteenth century. The show began with a huge balloon, inflated with hot air or gas, rising above the fairgrounds. Suspended beneath it was not just a basket, but a cannon.



Shot From a Cannon While In Mid=Air.

One of the most daring feats ever attempted will be performed by

Miss Ida LeRoy.

A monster balloon is inflated with hot air, a huge loaded cannon is suspended from the ropes, into the mouth of which the iron-nerved aeronaut crawls, taking her parachute with her. Everything is then made ready and the balloon is released from its fastenings, rises majestically and sails upward toward the clouds. When it has reached a height of three or four thousand feet, a signal is fired and the great cannon belches forth its precious load of human freight with a mighty boom. The lady and her parachute are hurled into space, the parachute opening and carrying her safely to earth. This is without a doubt the most daring, as well as the most thrilling feature of the nineteenth century.

It must have been a truly amazing sight to have seen Miss Ida LeRoy shot out of a cannon and parachute to safety at the 1899 Fairbury Fair.

Before the balloon was released, Miss LeRoy climbed into the mouth of the cannon, taking her parachute with her and disappearing from sight. When the balloon reached a height of three or four thousand feet, a signal sounded across the grounds. With a loud report, the cannon "fired," and

Miss LeRoy shot out into open space. Her parachute opened below the balloon, and she drifted safely back to earth while the crowd roared. For Fairbury residents used to seeing horses, buggies, and steam trains, watching a woman launched from a cannon in mid-air must have seemed almost unbelievable. Many of us today would have loved to stand in that crowd and see her performance with our own eyes.

Balloon acts continued to appear at the Fairbury Fair into the 1890s, sometimes going smoothly and sometimes not. In 1890, Professor Moore of Sturgis, Michigan, was contracted to perform several balloon ascensions with parachute drops. A thunderstorm rolled through during the fair, and not all of the planned ascensions went as scheduled. Fairgoers who came expecting to see the professor sailing over town instead had to be content with the music of Spencer's Military Band, which became the most popular attraction that year when the balloon shows faltered. Even so, the idea of balloon ascensions was now firmly planted in the public imagination, and fair organizers kept returning to it whenever they wanted to draw a crowd.

By 1897, another aeronaut, Professor Kilgore, was making balloon ascensions at the Fairbury Fair. The Blade reported that the combination of his balloon show and the Streator Zouave Cadets' military drills was so successful that it helped put the fair association out of debt. When thousands of people paid admission to see a man rise into the sky under a balloon, it was not just a spectacle; it was also good business.

In the new century, technology advanced again. At the 1907 Fairbury Fair, the main feature was no longer just a balloon but an "airship" named Columbia. This airship was an early dirigible. It was still a gas-filled craft, but it had some steering ability. The plan was to inflate the airship at the fairgrounds using a gas-generation setup and then have the pilot, a man known as Capt. Al-Dair, fly it over the crowd.

Things did not go smoothly. The first attempts at inflation failed, and the Blade reported that the artesian water from Fairbury's city well did not mix properly with the ingredients used to form the gas. In reality, the problem was likely a finicky chemical setup that reacted poorly to the local water chemistry. As with the earlier balloons, the gas plant was temperamental, and it took time and experimentation to get everything working.

When the airship finally lifted off, it rose slowly and drifted east, only to suffer a mechanical problem when the steering gear caught in the netting and broke some of the paddles. The ship came down just east of the fairgrounds. A later attempt carried the airship to about 1,000 feet, but a strong north wind pushed it back and forced another landing outside the grounds. Even with these difficulties, the sight of an airship floating over Fairbury in 1907 must have left a lasting impression on those who watched.

As we look back on a century and a half of the Fairbury Fair, it is worth remembering that our ancestors were not only farmers and shopkeepers but enthusiastic fans of cutting-edge technology and high-risk entertainment. They packed the grandstand and the infield to watch balloons inflate, listened for the signal shot that sent a parachutist or a lady in a cannon into the sky, and followed balloons down Main Street when the wind carried them away.

Today’s fairgoers enjoy demolition derbies and carnival rides. A hundred years ago, the thrills were quieter but no less dramatic, drifting high above the Fairbury Fairgrounds under a canvas balloon filled with hot air and homemade hydrogen.